

Good Conversation

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Valedictory

Bishop Grahmann, members of the board of trustees, President Sasseen, faculty and staff, family and friends, and, yes, you the graduating class of 1992, my graduating class. As we begin to wrap up our time at the University of Dallas, perhaps, we should recall the image with which Dr. Wilhelmsen opened our first academic year. If I remember correctly Dr. Wilhelmsen compared the work of the University of Dallas to something like Justinian standing at the gates of Constantinople guarding the heritage of the west from hoards of barbarians. To an impressionable young man from Shorewood, Illinois, who somehow thought convocation attendance was mandatory, saving the great intellectual and sprititual tradition of the west or of any other direction for that matter seemed far away and distant especially from this small, hill in Irving, Texas.

Four years later that crisis is real. Our culture abounds in mediocrity, our nation questions more and more the fundamental roots of our political order even as the world looks to the United States for direction and our country's acknowledgement and service to a divine purpose seems awash in a land where religion at best, for many, takes place on Sunday mornings for an hour or two.

So I ask, what is it that we do at the University of Dallas which answers this crisis? Simply put, we promote good conversation. In fact, I propose that the mission statement of the school be changed.[This is the radical part of my speech.] The mission of the University of Dallas, according to my proposal, is to establish a place where good conversation can be born, developed and fostered. The University of Dallas extends an invitation to discuss the questions with the great minds in a setting where it is offered not only that truth exists but that it can be found on a hill in Irving, Texas.

The method is simple. First, one must set aside prejudice and open their heart and mind to the possibility that Aristotle, Aquinas and Shakespeare are not simply dead white males but thinkers who have something to say, even to the twentieth century. Then one must listen closely to the texts one reads and what is taught in class. Soon, one can begin to hear murmurs rising from the text, murmurs which eventually become full voices who not only speak to the twentieth century but also to each other. This happens, honestly. I have heard Shakespeare speak to Plutarch, Blake speak to modern physics and Dante warn those entering the organic chemistry lab. The University of Dallas offers us the best conversations in history, here and now, if we only listen.

We are eaves-droppers who are lead in our eaves-dropping by some of the best listeners around. The faculty of the University of Dallas have been listening to these conversations for years and direct us to the spots where Nietzsche cuts down Kant, Augustine rails at the Greeks and Homer speaks to Joyce. We are students of great students who teach us that good conversation begins with good listening.

Now comes the good part. Once we have listened and digested some of these conversations, we are allowed to participate in the debate. The answers we give in class, the papers we write and the tests we complete offer us a chance to include our voices in the hum surrounding this hill.

Our conversations continue out of the classroom, not only with special lectures and programs but also in the dorms, cafeteria and capachino bar. This year we were honored to have two presidential candidates in two days allowing us a glimpse into the immediate conversation about the future of this country. We converse on the Athletic fields and courts where our basketball team reached new heights in the NAIA playoffs and our Rugby Football Club captured second in state. And our conversation reaches the dance floor where, perhaps, dancing the two-step to George Strait or Garth Brooks is the epitomy of getting matter as close to matter as possible without breaking form.

Our good conversation also takes us to Rome. Norberg-Schultz once asked, "Why do we go to different places?" and quickly replied, "because they are different." In Rome, Greece and Europe we converse intimately with a tradition over 2,000 years old. In our first mass at the tomb of Saint Peter and in our first walking tour of Rome we are baptized into the spaces and spirit which make up and surround a city attempting to unite the traditions of Athens and Jerusalem. Greece draws us back further to sites in Olympia, Athens and Delphi. Some of us were fortunate enough to be in Berlin when the wall fell and the Germans lead the way in saying that the cold war is over. In our travels we speak not only to Parisians, Florentines and Berliners but to Paris, Florence and Berlin. Rome teaches us that America is not the center of the world but the child of an ancient tradition.

Ultimately, all these conversations, from the lab to the streets of Rome are an attempt to speak to God through his creation. Our most important teacher hangs on a cross in the chapel where our most important conversations take place. He speaks to us in the mass, through those around us and through his creation and waits for our reply. Without God, all our conversations are cries in the dark. God is the answer to the crisis of modernity, as he has been the answer to all crises, but he is an answer not easily read leaving us to converse among ourselves.

So, what does the University of Dallas say to this crisis? It says yes to the proposition that truth exists and can be found. It says yes to a political order that attempts to balance freedom and civilization. And it says yes to a benevolent God who loves his creation. Most importantly the University of Dallas is a place, must be a place, where free speech and discourse is allowed to flourish.

I have heard it said that students of the University of Dallas are good people. And we are. But is being good enough? The mediocrity of our culture calls for great artists and poets, our politics call for great statesmen and our God calls for great service. Mediocrity breeds mediocrity. The University of Dallas breeds greatness. The best thank you we can give for the education we have received, beyond a few million dollars for a new library, is to take what we have heard and speak it in our daily lives. From the home to the office, this education must carry on.

I do not doubt that we will do great things with our lives. There are just too many great people here to do otherwise. But remember yourself as a freshman who came to this hill timid and shy from places as far away as Boston and L.A. and from as near as Irving and Fort Worth. Whether you know it or not, you were drawn in by an irresistible force. Somehow the bells at the end of the mall sent out a call around the world asking for volunteers to do the seemingly impossible, to carry on the conversation begun at the Agora at the bottom of the Acropolis and to continue the conversation God began with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. The University of Dallas and Rome have shaped our conversations to be the best. So remember the bells as they ring clear following graduation calling others to a seemingly impossible task and remember Charlie Brown's innocuous phrase "Keep Talkin," because in this way we hold back the hoards from the gates of Constantinople and in this way we say yes to the University of Dallas.